

THE MAN WHO KNEW NANCY DREW

“NANCY AND ME – OUR LAST DANCE”

Readers of Carolyn Keene’s Nancy Drew adventure stories, a popular mystery series for young adults which achieved nationwide popularity – worldwide popularity, really – after World War II, will surely recall Ned Nickerson, Nancy’s jolly, good-humored and faithful chum. The Ned Nickerson portrayed in Keene’s stories shared countless thrilling adventures with the vivacious sleuth throughout their teenage and young adult years in Long Island and the New York City area before the war.

Now retired, Nickerson was for many years a producer of commercial and industrial training films and videos. He also was, and is, active a director of what was originally the family firm, but is now a publicly traded Fortune 500 company with operations in the abrasives, insulation and modular container industries.

Recently, more than 50 years after those celebrated exploits, the real Ned “Nick” Nickerson finally told his own story. Nickerson, 76, now lives in Sun Valley, Idaho. On October 9, 1988, on the deck of his home in the upscale Sun Valley neighborhood of Fairways Loop, a chip shot from the 11th green of the Sun Valley Golf Course, Nickerson shared some candid recollections with Colorado writer Wiley Jackson.

The subject? What else, but Nancy Drew?

Most people don’t know this, but Nancy Drew was a hell of a good dancer. Nothing flashy, nothing like that, but she moved real quick, real neat. You could tell she was having fun. Alive, you know, like a cat when it stretches and tears shit up.

I dig cats a lot. Big secret, right? Look at Ruby here. [*Nickerson leaned far to his left and stroked a big white cat sleeping in a white acrylic lawn chair, curled on a flower-patterned cushion.*] Must be 16 years old now, he’s gone through what, a cubic mile of cat litter maybe?

He’s a go-getter, hell on mice.

You and me sit around and watch a while, maybe he’ll get all worked up and he’ll yawn. Maybe go wild, have a dream, twitch his paws. Hell of a cat, hard worker. He does everything I tell him. I got his number. I go, “Hey Rube, get a *job!*” Watch, he’ll get up, pack his lunch here in a minute. [*Nickerson roared with laughter. The cat grunted and stretched on the cushion, but curled up asleep again.*]

You ever get so you stretch like that, you know? The way it feels? Well, that’s the way Nan was. Physical, real physical. She was fun to be around when the band cut loose. A hot dancer. Very hot. Well, you got to remember that was before all that Dirty Dancy stuff on the tube and whatnot. We

were pretty naïve. We were goddamn dumbos, if you want to know the truth. Not like kids now.

When we got cookin', those days, we maybe did a fast foxtrot, shook the old fanny, things like that. Not like that wahzooomba stuff you people do now days. You a dancer? You got pretty big feet there, son, you don't mind my saying so. I wore shoes big as yours I'd hafta take about eight steps before those shoes started walkin'.

Well, it was fun, it really was. Nancy and me, just kids having fun, you know. Been a while. Hard to think it was what? 40, 50 years now? I was quite a dancer for a while there myself. I was a young buck and didn't pack my little buddy here then. [*Nickerson laughed and fondly whopped his modest paunch.*]

Old Keene, when she wrote those Nancy Drew books – Carolyn Keene, the big writer, remember her? – she always got in a dig at me, you know. In those books, I'm always "Nancy's chunky chum" or "Nancy's hefty sidekick" or something like that. Keene had some personal problems, you know, had some stuff to work out, so she worked it out on me, I guess.

I never got along with Carolyn Keene at all. You may have picked up on that, am I right? Between you and I – don't write this down, now – she was a Grade A puke. She was real protective, always creeping around like Suffering Jesus while she worked on those books, always hanging around Nan, you know, like a fly around your face?

Especially when yours truly was on the scene. We wanted to go out for a bite, go to a club to catch some music, or something. Well, Keene'd want to come along, holding that goddamn little purse under her chin like this, both hands, afraid somebody would have some fun. Gave me the willies.

I got my own theories about that, which I definitely won't go into, like maybe she had a case of the ol' Blazing Bloomers for Nan

but didn't admit it to herself. That happened in those days, you know, like you didn't just come on to people like at the goddamn Meat Hook Bar or whatever, like now, for chrissake. Nowadays she could probably get a grant, big bucks, to jump around in an iron hood and chant moon crap or whatever.

But in those days, if you had a certain kind of a case of the hots, you just sat on it, hard. Did embroidery and shit, things with dried flowers, you know. Or you went to a certain *club* you knew about in the Village, you know, or a certain *island* down in the Keys, if you had some money, or a certain *beach* out past the Hamptons, or something like that, I guess.

All that was over Keene's head at that point, though. She was a lulu, let me put it that way. But I'm not gonna talk about it. That's all I'm gonna say about Keene. *Finito*. Case closed. You ask me about Carolyn Keene, my lips are sealed. Zipped up tight. Absolutely.

You bet your ass I wouldn't be telling you this if I wasn't pretty goddamn sure she was dead. Jesus. [*Nickerson looked around his yard dramatically, shading his eyes with his hand, scout-fashion.*] Jesus, she was alive, she knew I was talking to you like this, she'd be about a thousand years old now, on her deathbed, and she'd still come at me like the mummy, you know, stalk me down off the golf course here, rip me up with a crochet stick or something. Strangle me with the hose off her pee bag or whatever.

Old Keene, she was probably the kind of kid all she wanted for Christmas was a rubber glove, hoping somebody would get real sick and she could take their temperature. Scoop up all the barf, save the day.

I always figure you can tell a lot about a person by what you figure they wanted for Christmas when they were kids. I always wanted a big gold saxophone, one of those baritones or whatever, just stand up there, close my eyes, blow that gold sax, feel it

shake, you know. Hear it talk. Never got the sax, of course. Never touched one my whole life, near as I can remember. But anyway, mostly I had your basic build, you know, and your basic Nickerson square head, and that's pretty much where that chubby chum stuff came from. Really, I was always in pretty good shape considering that people then didn't work out like they do now. I wasn't like old chunky Chet Morton from the Hardy Boys books, who a lot of people got me confused with. Jesus, from those books you'd think him and I caused tides just walking by the seashore.

I knew Chet pretty well back then, when the Hardy Boy books were just coming out. Now to be honest, that guy actually did have a few pounds on him in those days, though he slimmed out a lot later. Back then, go for a drive, he'd put quite a lean on your roadster unless you loaded it up pretty careful to even things out. Back then, getting ready for a drive, you'd always go "Chet in the middle! Chet in the middle." That was like a joke we had.

It's funny. I ran into Chet quite a lot over the years. In fact, he did some jobs for me, worked out two or three East Coast distribution deals I'd hit the wall on a while ago, did this and that. Ran into him again at the Pritikin a couple of years later, back in '80, think it was. He kicked the bucket last year, right after New Year's, rest his soul. Quit smoking, triple bypass, ate all the vegetables and crap, the whole shebang. How about that? You do everything right, you still die young. You never know.



The Hardy Boys. I haven't kept up with the Hardy Boys at all. They could be dead for all I know, except for Dick, who lives over in Ketchum a couple of miles over there, but I hardly ever run into him. Yeah, there was a third Hardy Boy that nobody ever heard about. I don't know what the deal was, but he didn't get into the books. Maybe he was like a baby or something when they were famous, or juvenile delinquent or

something. But he's in real estate now, condos and all that. He changed his last name. You wonder if being a Hardy Boy, even Hardy Boy No. 3, was maybe hard to deal with. And I guess if I had a name like Dick Hardy, I'd change it too. What kind of people would name a kid "Dick Hardy"? You wonder, what are these people thinking of?

Anyway, you read those books, you'd think I was the Big Whopper Boy, from the hamburger place or whatever, or the Blob from Jupiter. Well, that's bullshit. But I don't mind.

Old Keene's dead, thank God a thousand times, and I'm sitting here enjoying life, clipping coupons. Rough life, huh? So what the hell. Books, what can you do? People see what they wanta see. They call you fat, they call you dumb, nothing you can do. Keep laughing, outlive 'em if you can.

We were talking about dancing, right? Well, I remember, a couple of years before the war, Nan and I used to go out on Long Island to like houses of people we know, the there'd be, you know, dancing and drinks and all that, usually outside, on these little patios on high ground above the Sound. People having fun.

Sometimes there'd be a trio, you know, cats that wasn't famous yet, and these little lights they'd string up on wires so people could see to dance and whatever. Moths, moths flying all around those lights. Maybe there'd be some people, other side of the boathouse, smoking a little weed they scored on the West Side or Harlem or somewhere if they was extra hip.

It wasn't like Gatsby or anything like that. It was farther out, places of just regular people we knew. It wasn't like the super-rich part. Well, it'd look pretty plush now, compared to what people have now, this kind of setup. [*Nickerson gestured at his house and deck.*]

I mean this place looks all right, and it ought be for what we paid for it. But you got a place like this, the American Dream, right? Right? You know, trees, view, golf course over there, no fumes, smells okay, and whattaya got? Whattaya got?

You're a smart guy, you tell me. I've got some money. I'm a pretty rich guy now. I didn't start that way, remember, though I didn't start out poor either, so here's where I am now. So what goddamn good does it do me? You tell me.

I'm my own goddamn gardener, for chrissake. With that automatic water thing and all over there. It's got a timer and I haven't figured it out yet. You good with stuff like that? You want to fart around with it after we talk? Help yourself. Be my fucking guest. Got about 85 knobs on it, switches and all, and this dial thing with 70 numbers. Star Wars, for chrissake.

So this sprinkler thing cost about a zillion bucks, and it squirts whenever it feels like it, near as I can tell, like about 90 times on Wednesday or whatever. Usually when I'm out there bent over like some old dork, picking up old smoked salmon wrappers and crap that blows up from Fairways Road. *[Nickerson rose and strolled over to a corner of the deck, pointing to a leaf rake propped in the corner of the deck's parapet.]* Over there's my very own fucking rake, you see, which I bought at a garden fucking boutique in Los Gatos. Place looked like a bar.

So what's it got me? *[Nickerson peered over the parapet.]* Look at that big thing there, that brown stuff, how that is over there. Looks ratty.

So here it is: I go to fire the lazy-ass S.O.B. gardener, and he's me! *[Nickerson laughed richly, returned to his chair, and plopped down.]* Shit! I shoulda been born Japanese. Some of those guys know how to be rich. They aren't out there, you know, getting squirted in the ass while they're picking up shit off

the lawn. Look at this! We're looking at the Decline of the West here!

And why do I bother with this lawn stuff? Hey, get this. Let me talk into that recorder, son. *[Nickerson bent over the table and spoke intently into the recorder, using a mock-solemn voice.]* Well, in case some solid sold swami from Aboo Gaboo comes to town looking for a place to live, makes me an offer I'd be fucking crazy to turn down, that's why. *[Nickerson laughed and resumed his previous voice and position, leaning back in his chair.]*

Hey, it happens! Guy lives over there, he's from Kuwait, thing on his head and everything, prays every day. Prays on his deck when the weather's nice, gets right down there like he's eating outa the dog bowl. Think I'm joking? Hang around a while, you can watch him from here, look right through that bush, there by those leaves where that yellow stuff is, left of the stick. He's got money makes me look like Pa Kettle. Wants this place for his goddamn birdhouse or whatever, out comes the checkbook, he's got it.

But what am I talking about? Nan Drew, right?

Well, Nan ate like a horse, first of all. Keene never mentioned that, did she? I tell you, Nancy Drew ate like a goddamn grizzly bear. A tremendous eater. In those days, the guy did all the paying, even if the gal had all the cash in the Western World, and nobody even thought about it. So she and I'd go out, in Manhattan, you know, and they'd put on extra help when they saw Nan coming. Things were cheap in New York then, too, not like now.



Hey! *[Nickerson suddenly sat upright and peered over the deck parapet at a passerby on the leaf-spattered street beyond. He poked the cat, which stirred and groaned but didn't wake.]* Hey Rube! Fresh meat! Look at that old dickhead over there, walking that little dog.

Looks like a squirrel. [*Nickerson sat back again.*] Maybe I oughta get a skunk or something, raccoon, take it for walks on a leash. You go for that, Rube? Like a skunk around the place, stinking things up? Shake this silly-ass town up, get notorious.

You know they got a mayor here? Damnedest thing I ever saw, 85 or something old farts like me live here, and they got a mayor, cops and all. They're afraid we might crank up our pacemakers and start throwing laxative jars through each other's windows, I guess. Get whacked out on beta-blockers, flip out, get wild.

Okay, let's talk Nancy Drew. You know, you're a real gentleman, listening to an old guy talk. You got enough tape in that thing? I got some inside if you run low.

Where were we? Money, right? Food, anyway. Well, the way Nan ate, it was tough. I tell you, I just had this little fund thing, like about \$70 a month or whatever in those days, and it didn't go very far anyway, and then Nan would tie on the bag in some nice joint in Manhattan. There we'd be in Chinatown, some ritzy place, Chinese guys with swords and gongs and shit, and I'd be worrying about doing the dishes for about a thousand years to pay off the bill.

Well, I bitch a lot, you know, but those were good times. I wish I'd spent every dime in the world watching Nan eat, because I'd have that much more of her to think about now. God, it was good to be young! Not like now. Now, I can buy about anything I want. But I just don't want anything you can buy.

Just as long as I can keep on doing things. I don't wanta be like Reagan, you know. He's been reamed out, you know, boogered out by those urologists and whatever. Bend over far enough, he can look up his dick and see out his ass. Look up there, check it all out: blue sky, clouds, birds, flowers. "Look Mommy," he goes to old Nancy Reagan. "Looky there, the Moons of Mars! Wanta

peek?" [*Nickerson laughed heartily until his eyes took on a faraway look. Then he let fly a quick shrill fart.*] Whoa, excuse me a minute. Be right back. Can I get you something? Beer? Ice tea?



Here you go. Hope you like it with lemon. While I was in there, I was thinking. I remember the last time I saw Nancy. Real clear, just like yesterday. It was kind of dramatic, when you think about it, like in a movie.

One beef I got with life is that it's always so undramatic, compared to the movies. In real life, you know, nothing ever ends. You always gotta tidy up afterwards, call the insurance guy, get a permit, or whatever. Change pants, put the stuff away, paint the fence.

Well, the thing with Nan was different. It ended, just like a movie. It was hot stuff, and then it ended. Bam! Just like that. Things that end like that, like in the movies, you tend to remember. It gets your attention. This sounds corny, but it was a turning point for me personally.

For one thing, it was the first time – well, the last time too – I ever saw Nancy without her clothes on. With the lights on, anyway. Now why're you laughing? [*Nickerson laughed.*] Laughing at an old man! Gimme back that ice tea.

No, just think about where I'm comin' from. Be nice – I'm real old. We're talking the 1930s, remember, or whenever it was. What I'm talkin' about was hot stuff in those days, especially if who we're talkin' about is Carson Drew's kid.

I shouldn't tell you this, this is off the record. Ah, hell, you made me talk, right? I'll deny it. You're not a Mormon or anything, are you? Oh Jesus, is that thunder? [*Nickerson looked about him in mock terror.*] Oh, help! No, I shouldn't tell you! Well hell, you look like you've been around, right? But what am I saying? I can't tell

you. Look, forget I ever mentioned it. Just forget it. Sorry. It wasn't anything anyway, really. [*Nickerson then began literally roaring with laughter, whopping his legs with his hands, sputtering, bouncing in his chair. He settled down, whimpered briefly, then roared again, finally clutching his torso helplessly, apparently almost in pain as the fit of laughter subsided. The cat slept on.*]

Sorry. I'm okay now. [*Nickerson took a deep breath, sputtered briefly with mirth, and regained his composure.*] I'm sorry. We made up some dumb private names for various things, you know, like everybody does. Forget it. She'd kill me if I talked about it. Sorry. Oh, God. Where were we? Woo, I hadn't thought of that for a few years. [*Nickerson shook his head, grinning widely, sputtered again. He cleared his throat, and finally composed himself, with evident effort.*]

So where were we? The boathouse, right? Well, Nancy Drew had this kind of a bony chest, you know. No, not the titty part, but up here, you know, with the kind of ripple things on it? [*Nickerson tapped his upper chest, making a hollow noise. Thok, thok.*] You know, the sterno or whatever? Sternum? Sterno, sternum, whatever. Pelvis, Elvis.

Anyway, she felt kind of bad about how bony it looked, you know? Or wait. Maybe I got it confused? Was it because I was staring down her dress or shirt, or whatever? Let me think here a minute. Maybe it was something else bothering her. Hell, it's been a while. You know how it goes.

Well, anyway. [*Long pause.*] Now what were we talking about? Okay, out on Long Island at somebody's house, right? *Dancing!* That's how we got started on all this. Well, there we were. Nan didn't want to dance any more, so we went out to this boathouse or shed or something there by the water, and we went in there probably to get away from all these rich turds who were there, like all named Vanderwoofer or whatever, with these big noses and these moths flying around their heads, talking *har raa waaa raa*

rar the way they do, and we went on in and it was so quiet and peaceful all of a sudden in that shed.

All there was was the two of us in this real dim, creamy yellow light, one dusty old bulb up there with the twisty little glass point on the end, you know, nailed on a rafter and these like cloth wires going into it. Old Edison's second bulb or whatever. Old No. 2.

And I kept suggesting, you know, Nan, nobody's losing any sleep over it – I meant the bony chest thing or whatever we were talking about. I go, but you, you know, could we, if you'd like, possibly get more **COMFORTABLE** by reclining, just leaning, you know, just for a **LITTLE REST**, on this pile of sails or croquet nets or whatever the fuck those things were in the shed. So **HOT** in here, my dear. Whew! Perhaps I'll loosen my **COLLAR**, if I may, my dear. You know how it goes.

That was during a couple of summers there when I was going through a real horny phase, like you do when you're young like that. And I wasn't worried about her chest bone thing. I was in love, you know. She was kind of lean, like Keene's books say, but I never spent a lot of time thinking about that, for God's sake. She got that from her Dad, I guess.

Now God almighty, there's a guy you could write about. That rotten old pecker was one of a kind. When they made Carson Drew, they threw away the mold. I hope to God they did, anyway. He was the most pompous guy I ever ran into. Always knew the score, to the max.

See him there at Nan's house, say something like Nice Day or Blue Sky, just to be sociable, you know, and he'd tell you what was really going on, like you were the stupidest dumb fucker on Earth. He thought I was shit and the made sure I got the message.

He had this nose like a saw. [*Nickerson's watch beeped softly twice.*] Whoa. Gotta leave you for a minute. Your tea okay? You sure? Be back in a shake. Don't go anywhere.



Sorry about that. They got me on about a million pills, and it was time to chow down. Where were we?

Carson's nose, that's right. My favorite subject. Some noses you never forget. Carson's was kind of big, but mainly it was real sharp, came to a point. It sort of got in your face, you know, and he had these little twitchy eyes like a rat's. Real pale blue eyes, like there was some creepy light burning inside his head.

Nose like his, he could fucking peck his way out of a coal mine, no problem. Always wore a suit, an old-guy suit with those big pointed lapels, real hairy like it was made out of a blanket. Carson *always* wore a suit, probably slept in it. Maybe he didn't ever sleep. I wouldn't be surprised. Real barrel of laughs, that guy. He smelled funny, too, like the inside of a wallet. You ever smell a wallet? Don't know where it comes from, but they all got that smell.

You know, Carson Drew kept some pretty funny company in those days. He was a buddy of Lindbergh's, you know that? Yeah, asshole buddies. Carson went to Germany with Lindbergh once, before the war, stayed with Goering even. Got his picture taken with Der Fuehrer, the whole shebang.

He went back later, stayed at Goering's again a year or so later, not with Lindbergh that time, though. He was shooting pigeons or turkeys or something with Goering, big fancy dinners in this castle, all of that. Had all the pictures, wouldn't shut up about. Nancy didn't like that at all, as you can imagine. Seems like Goering even gave Carson some fancy gun he liked to flash around, I sort of remember. Special white grip things on it, made outa horse teeth or something.

It wasn't like Carson was really a Nazi or anything, I don't really think. A lot of people got caught up in that stuff before Pearl Harbor, a lot of people had things goin' with Germany, friends and relatives, and there was all that stuff about the Reds and Stalin, and those rumors we heard about purges and things. It was different times then. You had to be there to know what was going through everybody's head. Very confusing.

But anyway, there was Carson Drew, the card-carrying buttwad of the century, sniffing after Hitler and those goons of his, and Nancy went up the wall, because she had something inside that clued her in to all that stuff. Like she knew what was happening over there, or what was gonna happen, and she always know what she cared about. Always.

And what happened was – well, I'm really not supposed to know some of this stuff, and I'm really not gonna talk about it. Ancient history, water under the dam. But what was going on was that Nancy had relatives over there. In fact, Nancy's mom was kinda from over there originally, like way back, from Poland or Russia and they'd lived in Germany for 50 million generations or something and there was lots of uncles and aunts over there. They weren't the kind of folks who were the flavor of the month in the good old Reich, if you get my drift.

I think that bothered Carson a lot, since he always came off like him and his whole family hatched out of Plymouth Rock or something holding their coat of arms.

Anyway, I heard, don't quote me, that Nancy's mom – she was in and out of that upstate hospital then – was getting letters from over there that sounded kind of funny, or scary, anyway, and then something happened. Maybe something in a letter, or maybe the letters stopped coming. Nan never talked about it real directly. Just once, in fact, but I kind of filled in the blanks later.

Some of the things I kind of figured out was way later, after the War, when they had those hearings with the Congress and Carson had to testify, and that picture in the paper of him, that goddamn nose out there about a yard, and those little peeper glasses up there, hair all slicked back, yakking away *puh yuer waaap yuerp* all puckered up like he was waitin' for a big old smooch from those senators. Great picture – Carson all the way. But you wouldn't remember that. Ancient history.

Frankly, looking back on it, I'm surprised that Nan didn't kill the old turd, just blow him right outa his Florsheims while he was spoutin' that stuff. She had a gun, too, not that horse-teeth gun Carson got from the Nazis, and she felt very comfortable with it. No problem. She showed me once. For here, it was just like some regular thing you have around to fix things with. Pliers, gun, hammer, tweezers, like that.

Yeah, a couple of times I thought she was close to using the gun when Carson was blah blah talking about Goering and the boys in the castle or whatever. She had a definite temper. Hoo boy.

All that stuff we heard about afterward, the camps and all? Well, Nancy knew, in 1938 or whenever we talked about it, what was going on. Maybe from the relatives. Somehow she knew it. I didn't know, and I didn't much give a hoot, not like she did. I was too young and dumb. When I look back at all that, I go, how dumb can you be? Young and dumb. Now Nancy, it was like Nancy was never young up here. [*Nickerson tapped his temple.*] Not like the rest of us.

I didn't connect it up somehow, enough to care like I should have. Most people didn't at that time. I mean, I was a kid with a zitty nose and a boner that stuck into the next time zone, for chrissake. Just a kid wanted to dance, have some fun. That's about as far as I got until the war came, and all the rest of it. That's the way we all were, really, except for Nancy. Just kids scootin' down the groove. Goin' for love.

That right, Rube? [*Nickerson reached over and gently tickled the sleeping cat along its ribs. It stirred and stretched luxuriously.*] Yeah, that's right, old cat. Love-ola, huh? That's right. Yeah, stretch, buddy, stretch. [*Nickerson pats the cat softly.*] That's right. You got it, Rube.

[*Inside the house a chime sounded softly.*] Whoa, that's the phone. There's a call I wanta take on that line. Excuse me just a minute. Hit the can if you need to. In there to the left, two doors down. Be back pronto.



I got cancer, you know. That's what they tell me, anyway. That's probably one reason I'm willing to talk about this stuff now, though I've always been a talker. Most things, can't shut me up. You know, I never felt much like talking about Nancy before. But thinking about all this stuff makes you feel kind of free, like all the consequences are all over with. Like you already paid the price. Like I was already dead and I can actually hear what I'm saying and say What a Bunch of Crap, or whatever. Very refreshing. It's great to be alive, by the way. You can quote me on that.

I'm a lucky guy. I had some fun, I got two great kids. I get along with my ex okay, she's in Santa Barbara, and my little girl lives in Winnetka, up by Chicago. Brand new baby girl. My son teaches at Stanford! How about that, my kid teaching at Stanford! Pretty hot, huh? Yeah, he lives in Palo Alto, two grandkids there. He's a good kid, even plays golf with his old man once in a while. And I knew Nancy, even if I only had her for a little while.

That night out on Long Island, Nancy and I fell in love, you know. And that night she said goodbye to me and goodbye to a lot of other stuff, for good. What I'm telling you is that we loved each other in that boathouse, and then she caught a cab home, all the way back to Manhattan, I guess, and I never saw her again.

Weird, huh? But if you knew Nancy like I did, it wouldn't surprise you. It was like in that boathouse with me, she found a secret fact, like she used to all the time. In those cases that Keene wrote about, remember, Nancy would always be finding these things like the gold ring in the old boot, or the cookoo clock in the hollow log, or whatever. She had kind of a gift that way.

I got this theory, partly from this book I'm reading in there, that there are these different universes we live in all that time that are mostly separate, and history's in there, and time, but on these different planes. Like this, kind of. [*Nickerson interleaved his fingers and waggled them in a complicated way.*] But we don't see these different planes, I guess, and they only cross each other at these like Node Points where there are these improbable things, important things that are kind of out of place.

And I think that the reason these hidden facts like Nancy could always spot, like the deed in the old saxophone or whatever, are so important is that they kind of make up these Nodes where the planes come together and cross. I don't understand this shit, but it's what I think.

Now I'm like everybody else. I just scoot around on my own plane, don't bother me with your alternate reality deal, gotta get to town, and so forth, blah blah. But Nancy could always spot these Nodes that mean a lot, you know? Where time and history and regular stuff all come together.

And in the boathouse with me, maybe she found like the silver whistle in the old bagpipe bag or whatever. She didn't tell me that night. We talked a little after, in the boathouse, and then she went into the house and called a cab, somebody told me, and I never saw her again. I felt her heart shake that night, and I never saw her again.

I heard some stuff about her, it wasn't like she died or anything. But she got serious in a big way, like there was no time to waste.

She went to Penn for a while, on a math scholarship, and then she went over to Princeton, and then it was Bell Labs, except they didn't call it that then, and there was a long gig at RCA, believe it or not. Isn't that the company with the dog in the ads? I always pictured the RCA dog listening to the gramophone, you know, and I get a laugh. Nancy thought dogs were totally dumb. Carson had about a hundred dogs when she was growing up. Go over there, they'd all bark at you, tear off your pants. Hated those goddamn dogs.

And all through then, the war was on, and so people couldn't talk about stuff like radar and bombsights and whatever, and then there was the Bomb, you know, and probably a lot of other stuff secreteer than that. That's where Nancy went, and she never came back.

But I don't know anything about that secret stuff. All I know is that she burnt every bridge she had. Not only to me, but she rolled up every road she knew that led to people. To her family, and that's another story, and to friends like Duncan and Garson and Margot, even the Hardy Boys, all those guys.

And I don't care what Carolyn Keene says about Nan and I, but Nancy broke her living heart when she said goodbye to me. I was there, and I wasn't dreaming. I'm no Einstein, but I know what was going on. People know that stuff, you know, long as they aren't totally crazy. Life is short, and people are built to know that stuff. Because it's all we've got that you can't call up, get some kid to deliver if you got the cash. Right?

That and cats, right, Rube? [*Nickerson reached over and patted the sleeping cat, smoothing the fur over its rib cage. It purred, bowed its back, and extended all four legs, yawning widely. Then it curled up again.*]

You wanta know what I think? Here's what I think: This is a nutty old man talking now. I think Nan knew everything about

what was coming – the war, and what was gonna happen. She knew that it was gonna eat everybody up and end in something totally fucking unthinkable, unless a few people, the right people, dedicated themselves to like a holy quest that was gonna take everything they had. And when she figured out what she was gonna have to do, she was gone.

A lot of people lost people they loved in that war, people who were dear, and warm, and all that. Everything they had, kids, wives, husbands, everybody's uncle, friends, guy down the street. I'm kinda like a widow of the War, you know. I lost Nancy Drew.

You know, Carolyn Keene made that big deal about Nan's last case, the Case of the Pickled Peccary, or whatever it was she called it. But I've always thought different. I think the War was her last case, and maybe she's still working on it. Like we haven't really won it yet. I live every fucking day with the War -- even sittin' out here in the sun, lookin' at that mountain -- because I lost her.

A lotta people think Nancy Drew is dead. That's fine. But there's some things I can't really go into, kind of stuff I personally know of, even with the security and all. Best thing I ever got in my life – I'm serious now – was a postcard I got from Santa Fe just a couple of years ago. It didn't say much. Just a regular postcard, picture of a cactus or a sombrero, or something.

Now the funny thing is that the part you write on had a couple of things I don't wanta talk about on it that only me and maybe somebody else could make any sense of, stuff from years ago. Stuff I'll remember till I croak. So don't quote me, I'm just one crazy old guy in Sun Valley, but I got this weird dream, you know, like we're still in touch, her and me. You don't think that's realistic or something, great. It's a free country. You think I'm fulla shit, fine. Fuck you.

Hey, I'm just old Ned Nickerson, a guy who hung around with Nancy Drew about a thousand years ago. Don't ask me. Old crazy Ned. But if you ask me, she's out there working on it, figuring it out, smokin' out bad guys, puttin' it all together. Working on the big case. Finding the lost locket in the lighthouse, or whatever. Something important that you and me will probably never hear about.

You know that night in the boathouse with Nan? It's like burned into me forever, the way she looked. It's funny. When I think of Nan, I always think of the National Anthem, the part about Amber Waves of Grain.

You know when you drive to Boise that time of year and it's a hot day, and there are those fields on the right over there that have all that thick yellow grass or straw or whatever? Like the richest golden color you ever saw all the way to the edge of the earth, big old sky up there, blue hills in the distance, maybe even those dark clouds so it looks so hot, you know, and you gotta stop the car and just look? Catch your breath because it knocked the wind out of you, seein' that?

Well, that's like the picture in my head I got of Nancy that night in the boathouse. Just the light from that little bulb up there all dusty. After all the time I'd known her, there she was with me, there on those sails or whatever, and I just could not believe it. You know, I still can't believe it. Amber Waves of Grain.

She was bare as a cat, stretched out there, her legs and belly gold like grain, goosebumps and like fuzz. Stretched out there so lovely, and my hand there just touching her side there by her hip where this shadow line was. That's what I still see. Most beautiful sight I'll ever see if I live a thousand years. Jesus, her face, looking into my eyes, smiling teeth, head tilted. Hard to figure it was 50 years ago or whatever.

I can still feel the heat, hear her laughing
right in my ear. Smell hair, wood, canvas,
dust all on everything, seawater smell from
the Sound. Hearing that old gold sax
blattin' away up on the patio, way out in the
dark. Like it just happened, you know. That
clear. My God, the dust in that boathouse.
We both started sneezing like crazy, and
laughing. Makes my eyes water just
thinking about it.

Say anything you want, I'm a lucky guy.
Very lucky. Lucky in love, that's me. Old
man, lucky in love, livin' all by himself in a
big house. Hey, I'm a funny guy, right?
Well, fuck the world. I love Nancy Drew.

But hey, that's ancient history, right? Here
we are, two hip guys and a white cat sittin'
in the sun, great day, checkin' out the view,
bird up there sailin' around, nothin' to do.
That other stuff's ancient history now.
Gone, right? Water under the dam.

And I don't wanta talk about that. 🍷